

IN THE UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT
FOR THE WESTERN DISTRICT OF TENNESSEE
WESTERN DIVISION

LEWIS JAMES SEALS, JR.,)
)
Plaintiff,)
)
VS.) No. 2:14-cv-2058-JPM-cgc
)
)
ADONNA SEALS et al.,)
)
Defendants.)

ORDER GRANTING LEAVE TO PROCEED *IN FORMA PAUPERIS*
REPORT AND RECOMMENDATION PURSUANT TO 28 U.S.C. § 1915

On January 24, 2014, Plaintiff Lewis James Seals, Jr., a resident of Memphis, Tennessee, filed a *pro se* complaint against Adonna Seals, Atasa Seals, Valorie Smith, JG Law Firm and the Law Offices of Valorie Smith, accompanied by a motion seeking leave to proceed *in forma pauperis*. (Docket Entries (“D.E.”) 1 & 2.)

Federal law provides that the “clerk of each district court shall require parties instituting any such civil action, suit or proceeding in such court, whether by original process, removal or otherwise, to pay a filing fee of \$400,” 28 U.S.C. § 1914(a). To ensure access to the courts, however, 28 U.S.C. § 1915(a) permits an indigent plaintiff to avoid payment of filing fees by filing an in forma pauperis affidavit. Under that section, the Court must conduct a satisfactory inquiry into the plaintiff’s ability to pay the filing fee and prosecute the lawsuit. A plaintiff seeking in forma pauperis standing must respond fully to the questions on the Court’s in forma pauperis form and execute the affidavit in compliance with the certification requirements contained in 28 U.S.C. § 1746.

In this case, the Plaintiff has submitted a properly completed and executed in forma pauperis affidavit. The information set forth in the affidavit satisfies Plaintiff's burden of demonstrating that he is unable to pay the civil filing fee. Accordingly, the motion to proceed in forma pauperis is GRANTED. The Clerk shall record the defendants as Adonna Seals, Atasa Seals, Valorie Smith, JG Law Firm and the Law Offices of Valorie Smith.

The complaint alleges that Plaintiff's estranged wife, Defendant Adonna Seals, forced Plaintiff out of the marital residence on September 12, 2013. At that time, Plaintiff requested the return of a fire-proof lock box which contained, among other things, Plaintiff's mental health records. Defendant Adonna Seals refused to return the mental health records to Plaintiff. Defendant Adonna Seals is represented in her divorce from Plaintiff by Defendant Valorie Smith. Plaintiff claims that "Defendants Valorie Smith and Atasa Seals caused to publish excerpts publicly in a court pleading "Request for Admissions" in the Shelby County Circuit Court (Case # CT-003953-13) of Plaintiff's privileged mental health records." Plaintiff further claims that excerpts of his mental health records were published in interrogatories and depositions filed in the Circuit Court case.

Plaintiff avers that the actions by the Defendants constitute invasion of "Plaintiff's protected right of privacy as recognized under the United States Constitution, the Tennessee State Constitution and at common law..." and conversion. Plaintiff seeks injunctive relief in the form of an order "prohibiting Defendants... from disseminating, transferring, publishing, syndicating, displaying, posting for view or access on or through the internet or in any other manner or media outlet, court pleading, broadcasting or otherwise using or exploiting or attempting to exploit the

mental health records...”, and compensatory damages in the amount of fourteen million dollars (\$14,000,000.00).

The Court is required to screen *in forma pauperis* complaints and to dismiss any complaint, or any portion thereof, if the action—

- (i) is frivolous or malicious;
- (ii) fails to state a claim on which relief may be granted; or
- (iii) seeks monetary relief against a defendant who is immune from such relief.

28 U.S.C. § 1915(e)(2).

In assessing whether the complaint in this case states a claim on which relief may be granted, the Court applies the standards under Federal Rule of Civil Procedure 12(b)(6), as stated in Ashcroft v. Iqbal, 556 U.S. 662, 677-79 (2009), and in Bell Atlantic Corp. v. Twombly, 550 U.S. 544, 555-57 (2007). Hill v. Lappin, 630 F.3d 468, 470-71 (6th Cir. 2010). “Accepting all well-pleaded allegations in the complaint as true, the Court ‘consider[s] the factual allegations in [the] complaint to determine if they plausibly suggest an entitlement to relief.’” Williams v. Curtin, 631 F.3d 380, 383 (6th Cir. 2011) (quoting Iqbal, 556 U.S. at 681) (alteration in original). “[P]leadings that . . . are no more than conclusions are not entitled to the assumption of truth. While legal conclusions can provide the framework of a complaint, they must be supported by factual allegations.” Iqbal, 556 U.S. at 679; *see also Twombly*, 550 U.S. at 555 n.3 (“Rule 8(a)(2) still requires a ‘showing,’ rather than a blanket assertion, of entitlement to relief. Without some factual allegation in the complaint, it is hard to see how a claimant could satisfy the requirement of

providing not only ‘fair notice’ of the nature of the claim, but also ‘grounds’ on which the claim rests.”).

“A complaint can be frivolous either factually or legally. Any complaint that is legally frivolous would *ipso facto* fail to state a claim upon which relief can be granted.” Hill, 630 F.3d at 470 (citing Neitzke v. Williams, 490 U.S. 319, 325, 328-29 (1989)).

Whether a complaint is factually frivolous under §§ 1915A(b)(1) and 1915(e)(2)(B)(i) is a separate issue from whether it fails to state a claim for relief. Statutes allowing a complaint to be dismissed as frivolous give “judges not only the authority to dismiss a claim based on an indisputably meritless legal theory, but also the unusual power to pierce the veil of the complaint’s factual allegations and dismiss those claims whose factual contentions are clearly baseless.” Neitzke, 490 U.S. at 327, 109 S. Ct. 1827 (interpreting 28 U.S.C. § 1915). Unlike a dismissal for failure to state a claim, where a judge must accept all factual allegations as true, Iqbal, 129 S. Ct. at 1949-50, a judge does not have to accept “fantastic or delusional” factual allegations as true in prisoner complaints that are reviewed for frivolousness. Neitzke, 490 U.S. at 327-28, 109 S. Ct. 1827.

Id. at 471.

“*Pro se* complaints are to be held to less stringent standards than formal pleadings drafted by lawyers, and should therefore be liberally construed.” Williams, 631 F.3d at 383 (internal quotation marks omitted). *Pro se* litigants, however, are not exempt from the requirements of the Federal Rules of Civil Procedure. Wells v. Brown, 891 F.2d 591, 594 (6th Cir. 1989); *see also* Brown v. Matauszak, 415 F. App’x 608, 613 (6th Cir. 2011) (“[A] court cannot create a claim which [a plaintiff] has not spelled out in his pleading”) (internal quotation marks omitted); Payne v. Secretary of Treas., 73 F. App’x 836, 837 (6th Cir. 2003) (affirming *sua sponte* dismissal of complaint pursuant to Fed. R. Civ. P. 8(a)(2) and stating, “[n]either this court nor the district court is required to create Payne’s claim for her”); *cf. Pliler v. Ford*, 542 U.S. 225, 231 (2004) (“District judges have no obligation to act as counsel or paralegal to *pro se* litigants.”); Young Bok Song v.

Gipson, 423 F. App'x 506, 510 (6th Cir. 2011) ("[W]e decline to affirmatively require courts to ferret out the strongest cause of action on behalf of *pro se* litigants. Not only would that duty be overly burdensome, it would transform the courts from neutral arbiters of disputes into advocates for a particular party. While courts are properly charged with protecting the rights of all who come before it, that responsibility does not encompass advising litigants as to what legal theories they should pursue."), *cert. denied*, ___ U.S. ___, 132 S. Ct. 461 (2011).

The first issue to be considered is whether the Court has subject-matter jurisdiction over this action. "Federal courts are courts of limited jurisdiction. They possess only that power authorized by Constitution and statute, which is not to be expanded by judicial decree. It is to be presumed that a cause lies outside this limited jurisdiction, and the burden of establishing the contrary rests upon the party asserting jurisdiction." Kokkonen v. Guardian Life Ins. Co., 511 U.S. 375, 377, 114 S. Ct. 1673, 1675, 128 L. Ed 2d 391 (1994) (citations omitted); see also Bender v. Williamsport Area Sch. Dist., 475 U.S. 534, 541, 106 S. Ct. 1326, 1331, 89 L. Ed. 2d 501 (1986) ("Federal courts are not courts of general jurisdiction; they have only the power that is authorized by Article III of the Constitution and the statutes enacted by Congress pursuant thereto."), reh'g denied, 476 U.S. 1132, 106 S. Ct. 2003, 90 L. Ed. 2d 682 (May 19, 1986); Insurance Corp. of Ireland, Ltd. v. Compagnie des Bauxite de Guinee, 456 U.S. 694, 701, 102 S. Ct. 2099, 2104, 72 L. Ed. 2d 492 (1982) ("Federal courts are courts of limited jurisdiction. The character of the controversies over which federal judicial authority may extend are delineated in Art. III, § 2, cl. 1. Jurisdiction of the lower federal courts is further limited to those subjects encompassed within a statutory grant of jurisdiction."); Owen Equip. & Erection Co. v. Kroger, 437 U.S. 365, 374, 98 S. Ct. 2396, 2403, 57 L. Ed. 2d 274 (1978) ("It is a fundamental precept that federal courts are courts of limited jurisdiction."). Federal courts are obliged to act *sua sponte* whenever a question about

jurisdiction arises. See, e.g., Insurance Corp. of Ireland, Ltd., 456 U.S. at 702, 102 S. Ct. at 2104 (“a court, including an appellate court, will raise lack of subject-matter jurisdiction on its own motion”); St. Paul Mercury Indem. Co. v. Red Cab Co., 303 U.S. 283, 287 n.10, 58 S. Ct. 586, 589 n.10, 82 L. Ed. 845 (1938); Answers in Genesis, Inc. v. Creation Ministries Int'l, Ltd., 556 F.3d 459, 465 (6th Cir. 2009) (“federal courts have a duty to consider their subject matter jurisdiction in regard to every case and may raise the issue *sua sponte*”). Under Rule 12(h)(3) of the Federal Rules of Civil Procedure, “[i]f the court determines at any time that it lacks subject-matter jurisdiction, the court must dismiss the action.”

In this case, Plaintiff’s complaint does not state a claim which invokes Federal subject matter jurisdiction. While he claims that Defendants’ acts violate his right to privacy under the United States Constitution, there is no implication of this right where the government or a government actor is named as the party allegedly violating Plaintiff’s rights. A private citizen is not liable for an alleged constitutional violation unless: (1) “the claimed constitutional deprivation resulted from the exercise of a right or privilege having its source in state authority,” and (2) “the private party charged with the deprivation could be described in all fairness as a state actor.” Edmonson v. Leesville Concrete Co., Inc., 500 U.S. 614, 619 (1991).

There is a Tennessee common law tort of invasion of privacy for publicity given to private facts. However, The Court also does not appear to have diversity jurisdiction. Diversity of citizenship means that the action is between “citizens of different States.” 28 U.S.C. § 1332(a)(1). A federal court has jurisdiction under § 1332 only if there is “complete diversity between all plaintiffs and all defendants.” Lincoln Prop. Co. v. Roche, 546 U.S. 81, 89, 126 S. Ct. 606, 613, 163 L. Ed. 2d 415 (2005) (citations omitted). As all of the parties named in the complaint are

residents of the State of Tennessee, subject matter jurisdiction based on diversity would fail as to the common law invasion of privacy and conversion claims.

Therefore, it is RECOMMENDED that the Court DISMISS the action WITHOUT PREJUDICE for want of subject-matter jurisdiction pursuant to Fed. R. Civ. P. 12(b)(1) and (h)(3).

The Court must also consider whether Plaintiff should be allowed to appeal this decision *in forma pauperis*, should he seek to do so. The United States Court of Appeals for the Sixth Circuit requires that all district courts in the circuit determine, in all cases where the appellant seeks to proceed *in forma pauperis*, whether the appeal would be frivolous. Twenty-eight U.S.C. § 1915(a)(3) provides that “[a]n appeal may not be taken *in forma pauperis* if the trial court certifies in writing that it is not taken in good faith.”

The good faith standard is an objective one. Coppedge v. United States, 369 U.S. 438, 445 (1962). The test under 28 U.S.C. § 1915(a) for whether an appeal is taken in good faith is whether the litigant seeks appellate review of any issue that is not frivolous. Id. It would be inconsistent for a district court to determine that a complaint should be dismissed prior to service on the defendants, but has sufficient merit to support an appeal *in forma pauperis*. See Williams v. Kullman, 722 F.2d 1048, 1050 n.1 (2d Cir. 1983). The same considerations that lead the Court to recommend dismissal of this case for failure to state a claim also compel the conclusion that an appeal would not be taken in good faith. It is therefore RECOMMENDED that the Court CERTIFY, pursuant to 28 U.S.C. § 1915(a)(3), that any appeal in this matter by Plaintiff would not be taken in good faith and Plaintiff may not proceed on appeal *in forma pauperis*.

Signed this 30th day of January, 2014.

s/ Charmiane G. Claxton
CHARMIANE G. CLAXTON
UNITED STATES MAGISTRATE JUDGE

ANY OBJECTIONS OR EXCEPTIONS TO THIS REPORT MUST BE FILED WITHIN FOURTEEN (14) DAYS AFTER BEING SERVED WITH A COPY OF THE REPORT. 28 U.S.C. § 636(b)(1)(C). FAILURE TO FILE SAID OBJECTIONS OR EXCEPTIONS WITHIN FOURTEEN (14) DAYS MAY CONSTITUTE A WAIVER OF OBJECTIONS, EXCEPTIONS, AND ANY FURTHER APPEAL.